LIFE BEFORE DEATH
John 10:1-10
September 16, 1979

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The voice on the other end of the line belonged to a woman who, the Sunday before, had chided me for not being more publicly vocal and aggressive in supporting a cause which is rather controversial. She said: "There's something you need to know about me. I have cancer. I have had prescribed surgery. I have undergone the treatments. I feel all right. It is gone, or arrested, or something, but there are no guarantees. I may live six months or five years or twenty years. Whatever I have left, I intend to live it. I used to be shy, reticent, kept my opinions to myself. No more. When I care about something I say it. - You see, there's nothing in life that scares me anymore."

I sat at my desk thinking for a long time after that phone call: thinking about how much of life we let slip through our fingers: how much of love we carry around in our hearts unexpressed, ungiven because we just didn't get around to it; how much of passion and commitment to great causes we carry inside, because we never found the time for it: or we were afraid of what our friends might think of us: how many hopes and dreams we hide in our hearts, putting off for some safely or vague future time when we'll give them a try. I thought about the precious gift of time we are given and how we don't seem to be aware of it until our own mortality hits us between the eyes. I thought about how right and how honest my caller's attitude was and how her condition is really only a variation on the universal theme of human mortality. And I wondered to myself if it really takes the announcement of the imminent possibility of our demise to shock us into valuing and living our lives with some degree of intensity and intentionality. I wondered if it is necessary for most of us to be spectators rather than participants in life: whether we have to be passive livers rather than active. I wondered about the fact that so many of us walk through life taking it for granted.

Jesus acknowledged that a person can fill out the days of a lifetime and miss the whole show. The author of the Fourth Gospel has Him saying as much in the lesson this morning: "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly," He said. "Life to the full", a modern translator renders it. That is to say, there are at least two types of life: the life we live left to our own devices, and the life God offers - or points to - in His son Jesus.

How unfortunate, therefore, that we have spent so very much of our time ignoring that subject and talking about something entirely different - and about which we know very little; namely, life after death. The popular mind set is that Christianity is "other-worldly", "pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die" religion that promises a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The really important Christian message, in the popular mind, has to do with life after death. But, contrary to that popular version, orthodox Christian doctrine, when it has been based on Biblical history, has always maintained that what Jesus was talking about was a totally new quality of life in the present, a new dimension of human living which begins now, or at least breaks in now; which in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is seen to be more powerful than death: but which is experienced in the present. Salvation is another word for what I am talking about. It does not fit comfortably into words, obviously. The longer the list of adjectives we use, the more hemmed in the idea becomes: new life - appearing right in the context of my every day living, like a crocus breaking through the snow in the spring time, continuing through death into an eternal future. It's what the New Testament calls salvation, heaven, the Kingdom of God. It is what Christianity is about: life: life before death.

We see it as it was lived in history by Jesus. He defines it for us. And it is the testimony of countless men and women before us that we are given it as we follow and imitate Him. In the fellowship of Christian people, God gives us new life in unexpected ways. It has two identifiable characteristics, this new life: fullness: by that I mean passion, decisiveness: a sensitivity to the preciousness of time and a commitment to live it fully. The second characteristic is joy: deep, profound, indestructible joy: not syruppy optimism, not the Pollyannaish refusal to acknowledge evil, which characterizes too much piety, but a strong joy which resonates in one's life, an unshakable confidence which stiffens the backbone even in face of hell itself. One of my favorite quotes is a line written by T.R.Glover. He was talking about the first century Christians and he said: "they were absurdly happy, entirely fearless and always in trouble" - an adequate job description, I would submit, for Christians in any age.

I sensed that in the phone call from my ~~friend~~ Man. It was related to the awareness of mortality, the fact of serious illness and the ever present possibility that it would return.

The philosophers have been obsessed with the idea that death in the abstract, and our death in particular, is a very ppwerful dynamic in the way we view ourselves, the future, and the way we live our lives. The late Paul Tillich captured it in a descriptive paragraph: "The face of every man shows the trace of the presence of death in his life, of his fear of death, of his resignation to death. This frightful presence of death subjects man to bondage and servitude all his life..." (Shaking the Foundations, p.170).

Literature, poetry, the films of Igmar Bergman are full of it. Death is the enemy in whose power we live out our lives. In his most recent book German theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes: "To keep one's life means to hold onto oneself: one hardly dares to live because of one's sheer dread of death..." (The Passion for Life, p.26).

Unacknowledged and unexpressed fear of death can hang heavily over life, paralyzing, robbing life of its vitality. Psychologically it can cause us to behave in uncharacteristic and sometimes irresponsible ways. Gail Sheehy, in her best seller of several years ago, Passages, identified as a "mid-life crisis" that curious syndrome which happens around the age of forty, when quiet, otherwise devoted husbands, grow long hair and have a fling with a younger woman, or model homemakers walk away one morning and show up at a pottery wheel in New Mexico. There are many variations on that theme, obviously, many of them healthy, normal and responsible. Sheehy helped us to see, however, that at heart they have to do with our mortality in the form of bifocals, bulging waist and receding hairline - a subject with which we have increasing familiarity as the years go by. How, the question is, to have abundant life, when time is flying by so quickly. The answer, I think, has something to do with confronting death.

To affirm death, to acknowledge it, own it, accept it - interestingly - does not seem to be a depressing exercise. In fact the very reverse seems to be the case. It appears to be freeing: it appears to open up a whole new perspective on life, a whole new range of sensitivities. The persons I know who talk about it most openly and with humor and wit, are almost all quite elderly. If I may postulate from the man who talked about abundant life in the very face of His own death, to affirm death appears to be the way to open oneself to the new life in Jesus Christ.

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The woman who called me was telling me that. And since that phone call I have either remembered or discovered many confirming examples. I recalled, and looked up, a paragraph Abraham Maslow wrote in a letter to a friend as he - Maslow - was recuperating from a serious heart attack. He wrote: "The confrontation with death - and the reprieve from it - makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful, that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, or to be overwhelmed by it. My river has never looked so beautiful...Death and its ever present possibility makes love, passionate love, more possible. I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstacy would be possible at all, if we knew we'd never die." (In Love and Will, Rollo May, p.99). A close call with death - helped him to see the beauty of a river and the miracle of life itself in a fresh new way.

I recalled and looked up an article in A.D.Magazine which had touched me several years ago. It was written by a newspaper man in Burlington, Iowa, who had started an organization for people with serious illness called "Make Today Count". Orville Kelley had been told that he probably did not have long to live. In retrospect he wrote, "We're so concerned about life after death, we forget how to live the very lives we have here on earth." Kelley describes the shock - the family fragmentation his condition was creating because he and his wife had not discussed it with each other - and the courageous decision they made to face openly and in love the reality of what was happening. Of the night they encountered it openly with their children at a family barbecue he writes: "you know, that night those ribs never smelled better and the stars were never quite as bright...We still have our problems. I still awake in the morning sometimes and think it's all a bad dream. Then I go downstairs and see the sun break across the horizon - not another day closer to death, but another day of life with which I am blessed...I have lived more in the past few months than I lived in all the years of my preceeding life, because now I'm aware of life itself." (A.D. January 1975,p.23).

That, I would suggest, is not far from what Jesus meant by abundant life. It does not have to be confined to those who know the imminence of death in a very personal way. They can teach all of us - that even in death, particularly in death, Jesus Christ gives life.

Skimming through a new volume of Emily Dickinson poetry I discovered these intriguing lines...

"A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died did not alive become..."

The new life in Jesus Christ is characterized by fullness, passion, gratitude, commitment - completeness. It is also characterized by profound joy. It is not simply the power of positive thinking: it is not the denial of evil: the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about happiness, joy - which breaks into life in this world.

Someone reportedly once asked commedienne Phyllis Diller how she came by her vital, sharp sense of humor which specializes in puncturing pretentiousness. She said - "Once you have the question of death resolved everything else fades into unimportance."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the announcement that while death has not been explained, and may never be understood, it has most certainly been resolved. It has been overcome by God's love. God became one of us - in Jesus Christ. He lived our life - died our death, and in His resurrection showed that God's love is more powerful than death. That is the happiest bit of information available to us. Beside that announcement, all else falls into perspective.

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And yet the institutional embodiment of that happy information, the Church, has not always - in fact, has not often, seemed very happy itself. For some reason Church and religion have come to represent grimness, sobriety, grayness; the worship of the church - which is fundamentally a celebration of the happy information we have - keeps coming off in the slow, determined cadences of our nineteenth century hymns. And while we Presbyterians value dignity and reverence as attitudes appropriate for the worship of Almighty God we do at times appear to be in pain - or at least bored - by the whole exercise.

No one ever accused European theologians of being jolly, but Karl Barth did write one time, "A gloomy, morose and melancholy Christian can obviously attest only a gloomy, morose and melancholy Gospel...not of Christ, but of the world without Him..." (Dogmatics, vol. IV, 3, p.661).

I was amused to read Jurgen Moltmann, one of the most prominent new European theologians, describing his reaction when someone in this country asked him if he had "enjoyed" a church service. He wrote: "In my country, that question can rarely be answered with a spontaneous yes. When I first heard the question it struck my German sensibilities as peculiar. Is religion supposed to be fun? Must one not take worship seriously, deadly seriously? Have we not learned under the thunderous word 'eternity' to confess our sins and to promise to live a better life? As children we were taught 'to fear God' but not 'to enjoy God': we had to sit still in church and were kept under control by our parents. The solemn hour with God dare not be disturbed by anything unexpected or irregular...The worship service was certainly not designed for enjoyment. God doesn't allow any fun with him!" (Op. cit. p.64).

That, unfortunately, is autobiographical for most of us. But fortunately, God, I believe, conspires to change it. God, I believe, keeps giving bits and pieces of His new, joyful life - particularly as we're trying so hard to be sober. Babies, after all, simply will not cooperate and be properly quiet during their baptism. When we venture into God's house with our little ones they won't sit still and keep puncturing the deathly quiet with urgent questions and comments. "I want peanut butter on mine," my little brother said once when my mother slipped him a piece of communion bread. And here, in this sanctuary, a year or so ago a little one was watching with what must have been awe, when the choir finished gloriously, the lights went down, the spot came on, the preacher appeared in the pulpit. He asked his mother - in a voice loud enough to be heard by the person in the next pew - "Is that God?" "No," she said, "that's the minister." "Where's God then?" the little one persisted. His mother said, "He isn't here this morning."

Well, God is not only here, He gives us, I believe, those beautiful, surprising interruptions of human life and joy. He loves us. He loves us so much He sent His son to save us from the deadliness of life without Him. "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly," He said. Fullness - passion - commitment - joy. That is both the call and the promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We sing it in December - but it's true every Sunday of the year - every day of the time God has given us.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
Let earth receive her king: Let every heart
prepare him room: and heaven and nature sing.

Amen.